



RESEARCH

Overleaf: Blue glazed vessel with floral decoration and inscription for king Merenptah. OIM E10579. 27.6 x 16.3 cm. Dynasty 19, ca. 1213–1203 B.C. Purchased in Cairo, 1920

PROJECT REPORTS

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CITIES

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It was in the *Oriental Institute Annual Report* of 2004–2005 that I first outlined a research project on the Archaeology of Islamic Cities. I have been fortunate this year to participate in a research group at the Institute for Advanced Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The subject of this program was “The Concept of Urban Change,” addressed by archaeologists and geographers specializing in periods from the Bronze Age (including Pierre de Miroschedji, well known to many at the Oriental Institute) up to the modern period. One of the leaders of this group was Gideon Avni, who has done fine research in the transition from Late Antiquity to Early Islam, particularly in the Negev region. This provided an opportunity for me to follow a different aspect of changes in the Islamic city.

I began with a subject “close to home,” our excavations at the archaeological site of Ayla (modern Aqaba, Jordan). I have usually focused on the foundation of this town in the late seventh century, during the Umayyad period or earlier. The later periods, including the changes of the later Abbasid and Fatimid periods, have been less explored. I was shocked to find that the geographer Eugen Wirth has compared the plan of Aqaba (Ayla) with that of al-Qahirah (Cairo) as “zwei frühislamische Gründungsstädte” (2000: fig. 22). This intriguing comparison suggests implications about the early development of the Islamic city. On a basis of scale and presumed complexity this comparison would seem a matter of “apples to oranges,” and indeed, one might question the urban nature of both Ayla and al-Qahirah in its earliest phase (ca. 969). Neither foundation was a *misr*, strictly speaking; or, depending on one’s definition, could they both have been part of this phenomenon?

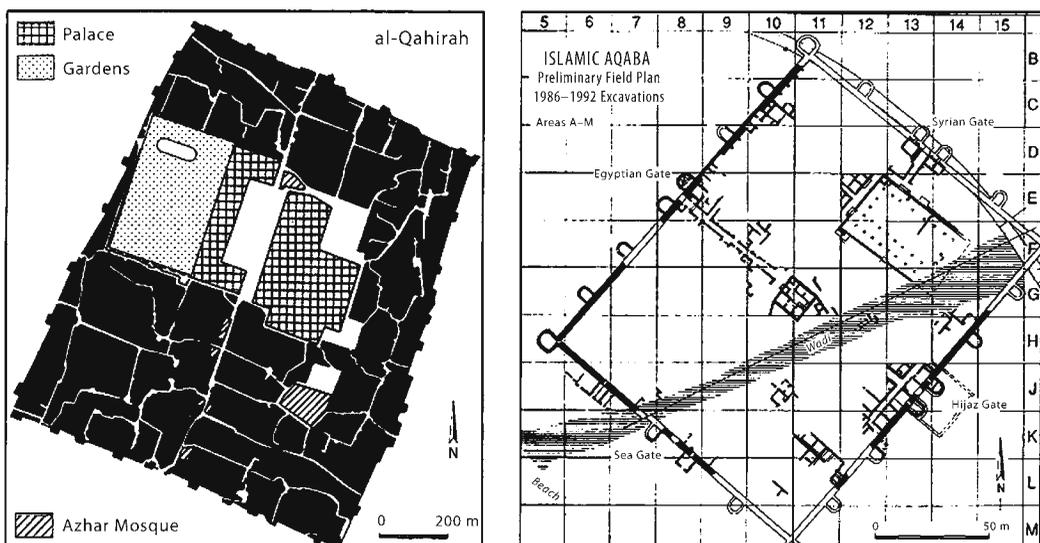


Figure 1. Plan of Ayla (Aqaba) compared with al-Qahirah (Cairo) (after E. Wirth, *Die Orientalische Stadt im islamischen Vorderasien und Nordafrika* [Mainz, 2000], fig. 22)

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The meaning of the term *misr* (plural *amsar*) has been much discussed in the study of the beginnings of the Islamic city. The Muslim conquest brought Arab armies into the highly urbanized provinces of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. These troops were settled in camps, often styled garrisons, near older urban centers; these foundations prospered and almost always became famous Islamic cities: Basra, Kufa, Fustat, Qayrawan. The list of *amsar* can be expanded to include virtually any place Muslims settled in numbers (Reitmeyer 1912) and indeed, the cognate *tamsir* seems to mean to settle or found a settlement.

The physical structure of the *misr* usually begins with an assumption of a camp of tents, then some mudbrick, and finally some stone structures; this is accompanied by assumptions of disorganized if not chaotic structures. Better understanding of camps and, more importantly, recognition of Arab familiarity with cities and the Arab's own urban tradition, has revised these prejudicial concepts. Moreover, as Kubiak notes concerning Fustat, this *misr* was at least the third founded, and its leaders must have realized they were planning a future capital city of Egypt. Each foundation had a central district with the *jami'* (congregational) mosque and *dar al-imara* (governor's palace; central administrative buildings), also various *dars* (elite residences, also called *qasr*; plural, *qusur*); around this center the *khitat* or allotments were marked out (as the name implies) for each ethnic group. Needless to say, archaeological evidence for the *amsar* is only slowly focusing on indirect hypotheses and lines of evidence.

Secondary *amsar*: The Palatine Complex

In a seminar for the Institute for Advanced Studies, I moved from studying this initial phase of urban settlement of the Arab tribes to studying problems of urbanism in a second transition, 850–1100, what might be termed the process “from *misr* to *madina*” (“from camp to city,” a paraphrase of Hugh Kennedy's famous article, “From polis to madina”). I began by looking at Jere Bacharach's suggested three phases in locational analysis of early Islamic cities, in which his earliest phase stresses the centrality of the mosque tied with the *dar al-imara*, the unified focus of religion and administration surrounded by open markets and residential blocks. His second phase describes a radical shift with the foundation of a new “palatine complex” away from the population, that is, separated from the older urban center. While there are earlier examples, this pattern is writ largest and in most dramatic fashion in the foundation of Samarra in Iraq.

Samarra presents a sequence of separate foundations in the ninth century: from Qatul in the south, to Muta'sim's “Surra man ra'a” in the center, to al-Mutawakkiliyya in the north. This last “city” is the clearest illustration of the process, since it was founded and soon abandoned around A.D. 860, thus leaving clear archaeological traces of the original plans. This new foundation of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil consisted of a residential area, the mosque of Abu Dulaf, and the separate palace complex of al-Ja'fari (his given name). The process might be described as the foundation of a *misr*, as Northedge suggested long ago.

In 868, soon after Mutawakkil's expansion of Samarra, Ibn Tulun consolidated his rule in Egypt with the foundation of al-Qata'i in direct imitation of Samarra. The urban history of Cairo begins with Fustat, the *misr* founded in 642, and then a series of expansions to the north. Ibn Tulun laid out a grid of 1,000 districts around an exceptionally large mosque, palaces, and elite residences (of which only the famed mosque remains). After another century, the Fatimids founded yet another city on very similar principals (military sectors, palaces, a mosque, and elite residences). A distinction for this tenth-century “palatine complex” was, for the first time, a strong city wall. The resulting settlement was a “compound city”; the continuing vitality of Fustat induced some

observers to speak of the *misrayn* (old and new, lower and upper), or indeed, one might see the older pattern of a lower town (*rabad* or *birun*) and the city center (*madina* or *shahristan*).

Al-Qahirah was organized as a formal, palatial complex: in the center was first the palace of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz and secondly that of his successor al-'Aziz (both ruled in the late tenth century). An axial street and parade ground is still called "Bayn al-Qasrayn" (between the two palaces). The first mosque, al-Azhar, was in the southeastern sector. Much of the remainder was left open or marked out as allotments for tribal or ethnic groups (i.e., *khitat*).

With this background of urban centers in Iraq and Egypt, I decided to explore the cities of Palestine during the Tulunid through Fatimid periods. The late tenth and eleventh century in this region is often taken as a dramatic break, even an "archaeological fault." Historians dwell on events indicating a decline of "state," the rise of nomads, and even earthquakes (A.D. 1033 and 1068). In addition, a new Turkish presence began to change military practice. The unsettled times even recall for many the break from "antiquity" with the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Archaeologically it has been called a cultural wasteland, and Kennedy has lamented that "between the death of Harun al-Rashid in 809 and the coming of the Fatimids in 969 there is not a single extant dated monument in the entire area of greater Syria." Even more implausibly, La Bianca finds no settlement remains for the same period; archaeologically, at least, one is dealing with a transitional period subject to mythologies.

In my report in the 2004–2005 *Annual Report* I wrote about the explorations I had undertaken of the early Islamic occupation of Caesarea (or Qaysariyya); I was reminded of this old study as I finished its final proofreading for publication while in Jerusalem. I had suggested that the early Islamic foundation was probably located in the southeast sector of the Byzantine city; this was the likely area of the *hadir* (pre-Islamic Arab settlement), the early Islamic fort (built upon the classical theater), and a possible mosque. More recent work by Ken Holum and Yael Arnon made me realize the applicability of these ideas of a "palatine complex" (and the necessity to rewrite sections of my paper). The inner harbor and Area LL excavations demonstrate the foundation of a new urban district with a new orientation that were apparently laid out in the late ninth century. The mosque proposed by many to be located on the Temple Platform is in an unusual position, however admired by Muqaddasi and Nasir-I Khusraw in the late tenth–eleventh century. The ninth-century walls also suggest a later Islamic settlement (these were incorporated into the Crusader fortifications). Thus the city witnessed by Muqaddasi was not that of Mu'awiya, of the 640s or later. The original Islamic town became the populous suburb, the *rabad*, in relation to the *madina* or new urban extension laid out in Tulunid and developed in Fatimid times.

While the port of Caesarea served the maritime interests of these Egyptian dynasties, the city of Ramla, east of Jerusalem, continued in its role as capital of the province of Filastin. Extensive salvage and larger excavations have sought to determine the structure of this city; for many scholars, the town of 'Anjar, built in the same years, might serve as a model, with its four axial gates named for principal destinations (al-Quds [= Jerusalem], Lud, Yafa [Jaffa], and Misr [Egypt]). However, Muqaddasi lists three additional gates located to the southeast, making a systematic circuit around the city. This suggests that by the late tenth century (but antecedent to the earthquakes and arrival of the Seljuqs), the city had expanded with this new "palatine complex" with mosque and walls). Thus Ramla was a compound city of a *rabad* (the old city) and the new Fatimid city or its *madina*.

Farther to the north was Tiberias (or Tabariya), the prosperous capital of the province of al-Urdunn. Again, archaeological research has shown an extensive early Islamic occupation, and the recent discovery of the *jami'* mosque places the early Islamic town firmly in the middle of the extended site. Years ago, Tim Harrison wrote a paper for me that was published in the *Journal of*

expectations of function and aesthetics for the resulting settlement. The new urban entity was grafted onto the older town and formed a compound structure. In effect, this relationship would have been identifiable to Muqaddasi and others experienced with cities of the eastern, Iranian world as the *madina-rabad* complex. The resulting urban form may be considered the precursor for the Islamic city of Mamluk and later times.

If I might return to Ayla, one can see a settlement sequence from Iron Age Tell Kheleifa to Roman/Byzantine Aila to early Islamic Ayla and finally to the twelfth-century fort of Aqaba. Early Islamic Ayla was rebuilt in Abbasid times. By the tenth/eleventh century one hears of troubles with political and religious dissidents, such as the Qarmatians and Jarrahids, which led to the battle of Aqaba in 982 and the sack of the city in 1024. If I might quote myself, “Once again, the spectre of thundering hoards may be overdrawn and suggestions of decline and collapse mask complex social and religious movements.” Thus Aqaba illustrates a cyclical process of urbanism in which the eleventh century seems to mark a transition, as seems to be the case in many other sites and regions.

Internal development of Aqaba may illustrate a more subtle urban change within this period. The plan of the archaeological site shows the early walls, but most of the buildings excavated belong to the later Abbasid/Fatimid phases. Thus one might interpret the Central Pavilion as a “central palace,” see the mosque rebuilt in a peripheral location, and commercial expansion in a new seafront *suq*, all elements of a later phase of urban planning. This pattern suggests that the “palatine complex,” the secondary *misr*, is not the only model for the Middle Islamic city. There were other transformations (archaeological patterns) that remain to be discovered, but this is the subject of future studies.
